



## Wages

Part VI of Karl Marx's Capital, Volume 1 is devoted to wages. We will use the first three chapters, 19, 20 and 21 in this section (**attached**). The short Chapter 22, on international differences in wages, is one of the very few chapters from Volume 1 that we will leave out of this course, but you can still read it on the Marxists Internet Archive, [here](#).

On the first page of Chapter 19 Marx says, among other things, that the *"value of labour... is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth"*.

The commodity that is exchanged by the worker for money is not Labour, but Labour-Power. After that, the entire product of the worker's labour during the contracted time belongs to the

boss, without any “compensation”. The product of the worker’s labour is greater than the payment given for the worker’s labour-power. The difference is surplus-value. The extraction of surplus-value from workers in this way is the defining characteristic of capitalism.

Through these three chapters on wages Marx continues to discuss this basic point in different ways. The minimum price of labour-power is that which is sufficient to keep the worker going until the next day. Or, it may be calculated over a worker’s lifetime, as Marx demonstrates here, and divided out to give an average day-rate. In all cases, including piece-work, the capitalist pays only for labour-power, and at the minimum price that will ensure the return of the worker to the workplace, next day.

Marx finishes Chapter 21 by declaring that if, under piece-work, the workers think they can get more by producing more, the boss will remind them quickly of the true relationship, which is not payment for labour, or for the product of labour, but only payment for maintenance and reproduction of the worker’s labour power.

*“The capitalist rightly knocks on the head such pretensions as gross errors as to the nature of wage-labour. He cries out against this usurping attempt to lay taxes on the advance of industry, and declares roundly that the productiveness of labour does not concern the labourer at all.”*

**The image** above is a photograph of one of the striking workers

in the 1968 “[Memphis Sanitation Strike](#)”. Their union was AFSCME. Martin Luther King went to Memphis, Tennessee to show solidarity with the strikers, who were badly paid, badly treated, not recognised and racially discriminated against. King was shot dead by an assassin at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he was staying while supporting the strike.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Capital V 1, C19, 20 and 21, Wages](#).
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